

Baby Food Jars

For Sneha B,
who always insisted on seeing me
as who she knew I wanted to be,
and never as who I was.

A small incident in a child's life is sometimes tagged for reference because it so neatly reveals the essence of the person. As the child grows, and the behavior repeats, the tag is brought out to categorize the new examples. One of my tags was "baby food jars."

It was fourth grade and Miss Burchill was explaining to the class that later in the year we would be doing a science experiment that required baby food jars. She knew that some of us had younger brothers and sisters at home, and for those of us who did, she wanted us to ask our parents if it was ok to bring in some empty -- and well-cleaned -- baby food jars. It seemed like an easy way to please my most-important-to-please person at the time, but I had lived long enough by then to know that things weren't always as they seemed. I said nothing to my parents about it that night.

The next day Miss Burchill asked if anyone had remembered to bring in some baby food jars. Only one girl had. She took two jars out of her desk and placed them on top. Then she basked in the double glow of a good deed done and a good deed praised, as Miss Burchill walked away with the jars. Easy enough, I thought, I'll go big. I'll do ten.

When I got home that afternoon ready to round up my jars, my Mom informed me that she had thrown them all out that very day -- it was garbage day -- so I would have to wait. In the days that followed, I remember being unnaturally interested in my brother's eating habits. Each day at school, Miss Burchill would

ask for more jars; there would be a couple here and a couple there, but never more than three or four.

When I knew I would have my tenth jar, I brought home some books from inside my desk in order to make room for the jars. The next morning I stashed the jars in the desk and waited for my big moment. But on that day she didn't ask for jars. And on the next day, she told us she already had enough jars, and that if we had any with us, we should take them home and thank our parents for her.

And just like that, the jars had turned on me, flipping from source of triumph to source of ridicule. I did some slow rearranging of the contents of my desk throughout that day, so that the books were all in front and the jars were all in back. I resigned myself to keeping some books at home and carrying them back and forth to school every day. It was a chore I soon got used to, and life went on.

But in the springtime, the ghost of the jars wriggled up into my consciousness and haunted my days and nights. I knew that on the last day of school I would have to clean out my desk, scrub it down, and have it inspected by Miss Burchill. There was no question that this was how it worked -- she had been my teacher in the third grade as well.

I couldn't find a solution to the problem. And by this point, the dread I was suffering was no longer just a dread of being caught with baby food jars in my desk, it was also a dread of being seen as someone who could be checkmated by baby food jars in a desk. Because I knew that's exactly who I was.

As much as I hated to do it, I went to my parents and explained the situation. My Mom, a wonderful bundle of kindness and confidence, was happy to deliver the perfect solution: bring them home one jar at a time. No one will notice. The fact that she hadn't assumed that I had considered this approach, and rejected it, knocked me off balance, and I immediately regretted having come to them. I said

“OK” with as much enthusiasm as I could muster and turned and walked away. Why had I rejected my Mom’s solution? Because even though the chance of getting caught was low, the potential ridicule from getting caught was high. “How many more do you have in there?!?!”, I heard a voice mocking.

But in fact it was my Dad’s voice that I heard as I reached the door. “We’ll figure this thing out,” he said, “I promise”. I turned to him and nodded, lips pursed, trying not to cry. I must have gotten these genes from him. A good part of the burden had been lifted.

That night after I had turned out the light in my bedroom, my Dad came in and sat down on the edge of my bed. “Here’s the plan,” he said. “Next Tuesday night there’s a PTA meeting at the school. I’ve been to one of these before. The classroom doors are all open. We’ll arrive ten minutes after the start of the meeting so that everyone’s in the gym. We’ll go to your classroom and get the jars.” *This* was the perfect plan, I thought, and an ingenious one at that. Somehow it hadn’t occurred to me that the school could be accessed at night, or even existed at night.

In the parking lot that Tuesday night, my Dad stopped me in a sliver of darkness on the way to the school’s front door. He handed me a sturdy paper shopping bag, with handles, folded flat. “Once we get inside, you lead me to the classroom. Then go in and get the jars out. I’ll stand guard at the door.”

We did just that. It was weird being in the school at night, with my Dad, and without my teacher and all the other kids. And with the lights off in the classroom. We turned them on. I took my chair down from on top of my desk, and pulled all the books out so I could get to the jars. I started putting them in the bag, two by two, but then my Dad spoke in a loud whisper, “Enemy sighted!”. I froze, jars in hands. I heard the footsteps approaching. “Good Evening,” someone said to my Dad. He answered in a calm and friendly voice.

“Indeed it is,” he said. The footsteps passed, faded and disappeared. “All clear,” my Dad whispered.

I finished my work, put the books back in, and the chair on top. When I got to the door, I reached out the bag of jars to hand to my Dad, but he refused it. Just a single quick shake of the head, and he started walking. He wanted me to carry the bag. Another short but deep stroke of fatherhood, I can see now.

When we got to the front door of the school, he opened it from the inside with his left arm only, allowing me to exit first. A great wave of relief washed over me as I stepped through. But what was my Dad thinking about his hypersensitive young son as I passed before him? Did he think it was me, or did he think it would pass? Either way, outside the school on the way back to the car, he was whistling. He was a good whistler.

As we drove home through town, with the bag of jars safely on the floor beside me in the back seat, I watched silently out the window with inklings of joy. I realized that I had regained a power I had lost over the past few weeks: I was observing things as they passed by. And it wasn't just the things outside the car that I could see. I could see the summer. I had felt it coming on, but it hadn't been available to look at. And now here it was. My friends, our bikes, lemonade, and late nights outside in the dark, well past bedtime, with kids shouting and parents chatting.

I don't remember anything about that summer now, but I do know it was a very good one. They all were.